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The Other Shoe

By William Safire

WASHINGTON, Sept. 16 — On July 6, 1972, William Sullivan — who had been removed from the top echelons of the F.B.I. by J. Edgar Hoover — sat in the office of the new F.B.I. Director, L. Patrick Gray. Mr. Sullivan wanted to get back into law enforcement, and passed on to Mr. Gray his suspicions about "Fedora," a Russian at the U.N. who was supposedly passing secrets on to the F.B.I.

By 1976, I am informed, the F.B.I. had largely concluded that "Fedora" was not their double agent, but was the Russians' triple agent — passing on disinformation to the F.B.I., and misleading our C.I.A.

In the current Reader's Digest, William Hurt breaks the news of the F.B.I.'s decision to disbelieve "Fedora," dating the decision in 1980.

Another Soviet defector, the former U.N. Under Secretary Arkady Schevchenko, tells me that "Fedora" must have been an amalgam of several sources. We'll be learning more from him on other matters, as well as from our most reliable defector, Anatoly Golitzin.

At any rate, we now know (1) that the men in charge of American counterespionage had been hoodwinked for 15 years, and (2) that the F.B.I. had been persuaded that its Soviet source was a phony for the last five years. In 1977 New York agents urged that "Fedora" be arrested before slipping back to the Soviet Union; they were overruled.

One of these days a story of a similar operation will come out: in "Solo," we thought we had two men penetrating the Communist Party apparatus. With one of these triple agents dead and the other dying, we can only surmise the extent of that disinformation operation.

With new eyes, we can now look back and change black to white, correcting the disinformation. What were "Fedora" and "Solo" sent here to mislead us about?

The most important use we made of our Soviet "spy" in New York was to establish the bona fides of a Soviet defector, Yuri Nosenko, who came to us shortly after the Kennedy assassination to assure the C.I.A. that Lee Harvey Oswald was not a Soviet agent. "Fedora" told us to believe Mr. Nosenko.

For nearly two decades our C.I.A. has been split between those who distrusted Mr. Nosenko and suspected he was a "plant" — among them James Angleton, and to some extent Richard Helms — and those who believed Mr. Nosenko, including William Colby and Stansfield Turner.

In recent years the disbelievers at the agency were labeled "paranoid" and pushed out, while analysts who embraced Mr. Nosenko were promoted. Mr. Nosenko has been a lecturer at the C.I.A., teaching counterintelligence to our spies, which the writer Edward Jay Epstein rightly calls "the crowning absurdity."

Here is the significance: if the F.B.I.'s "Fedora" tricked us, as the F.B.I. has believed for some years and now quietly admits, then we were systematically misled about Mr. Nosenko. James Angleton was right, and the "new-boy network" at the C.I.A. was horrendously wrong.

The other shoe has not dropped. Half the Soviet disinformation plot stands revealed; the other half sits in place. At the C.I.A., a wholesale re-evaluation should be taking place — not only reversing the verdicts of the past, which assured us that Soviet missiles were not accurate, but to question the judgment of those who were taken in.

Former Director Turner's friends are now spreading the word that the reason he fired a flock of hard-liners in his 1977 purge of realists was somehow connected to an investigation of renegade agents selling terrorist techniques to Libya. I think that is part of his cover-up for being suckered by Mr. Nosenko, "Fedora" and the disinformation scheme.

The Senate Intelligence Committee should demand the dropping of the other shoe in the Fedora-Nosenko affair, and should find out whether the three-man White House Intelligence Oversight Board did its duty in the Wilson-Terpil Libyan affair.

In the Ford years, the Oversight Board was set up to deal with intelligence abuses and its members were active; in the Carter years, the three men met every three weeks and rocked no boats; since June 5, when Mr. Reagan accepted the board's resignation, it has been out of business entirely.

Someday the President will appoint a new triumvirate to check abuses, probably headed by Glenn Campbell, at the time he appoints the 15-member Advisory Board to be headed by Anne Armstrong to review intelligence quality. Wrangling over the Executive Order on Intelligence is understandable, but to permit four or five months to go by with no Oversight Board in place makes a mockery of oversight.

The F.B.I. knows it was misled and moved to correct its evaluations. Now the C.I.A. must go through the pain of finding out exactly how it was deceived to make sure it is not still being victimized by a mole or a triple agent.